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SUBJECT: CHECKS AND BALANCES IN JORDAN, PART 3 -
PARLIAMENT'S CHICKEN AND EGG PROBLEM

REF: A. AMMAN 1856

[1](#)B. AMMAN 1834

[1](#)C. AMMAN 1823

[1](#)D. 07 AMMAN 4885

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Classified By: Ambassador David Hale
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (SBU) This cable is part three of a series which examines the peculiar system of internal checks and balances that serves as an accountability mechanism for Jordan's government. The first part looked at the Legislative Bureau, where all of Jordan's laws and regulations are written. The second cable examined the impact of provisional laws. Part three focuses on the powers and position of parliament.

[1](#)2. (C) Summary: Jordan's parliament rarely checks the power of the executive branch. Jordan's King sees political reform as leading to the day parliament can exercise greater leadership in policy formation, but he, his advisors, the security apparatus, and the cabinet all feel that parliament's track record, and its inhabitants, make the institution untrustworthy. There is a rumor circulating that the next government will contain MPs for the first time in a decade. The King considered and rejected that idea when he formed the current Dahabi government, and it is unlikely he will turn to it again over the objections of his intelligence chief. As they wait for a larger role on Jordan's political stage, MPs will continue to concentrate on services, which they can only deliver either by remaining close to the government or by being so difficult on policy issues that the government is compelled to buy their votes through tailored services to their districts. USG capacity-building projects are having a recognizable (and much appreciated) impact in parliament, yet until it obtains popular trust and political leadership, Jordan's legislature will remain a weaker institution that will be unable to fulfill its oversight responsibilities. End Summary.

Parliament's Dilemma

[1](#)3. (C) Though it has succeeded at times in blocking the will of the executive branch, Jordan's parliament is a weak institution bedeviled by a circular debate over how it can be strengthened. The body is caught between the heightened expectations of the electorate and the modest power that it wields. Contacts from across the political spectrum want and expect parliament to do more, but have little faith that the current electoral system can produce deputies who are dynamic and sophisticated enough to lead on issues of national policy importance, as opposed to simply following the policy prerogatives of Jordan's appointed governments.

[1](#)4. (SBU) MPs insist that they are willing and able to pursue a more independent and active role in the political process,

but claim they are not given adequate space to maneuver or the institutional strength to accomplish their goals. In the end, this impasse results in frustration and inaction in parliament and a sense among Jordan's political class that change will never arrive. MPs cannot introduce laws on their own, yet parliament is endowed with a wide range of other statutory powers which it can theoretically use to check the executive (Ref B). In reality, only on rare occasions has the parliament flexed its muscles by denying confidence to a minister, exercising its oversight responsibilities, amending the budget, or rejecting provisional laws (Ref A). It has never overridden the King's veto.

¶5. (C) There are occasional signs of opposition from the parliament, but they are often marginal or short-lived. Recently, a draconian traffic law enacted by the Bakhit government as a provisional statute was struck down when MPs were subjected to overwhelming popular criticism of the measure's costly implementation. Yet this is the exception that proves the rule - in the recent ordinary session, the lower house failed to make a single amendment to any of the laws returned to them by the senate for a second review. During the budget process, an MP bragged to us that he was responsible for an amendment that made its way into the final version - a boast that served to demonstrate the rarity and modesty of such action.

¶6. (SBU) In the absence of meaningful power, the parliament is sometimes caught napping. A dearth of legislation during the ordinary session was due to a glut of laws stalled in committees which saw little reason to expedite their work. A recent session of parliament had to be canceled because of the lack of a quorum. Note: In previous sessions, Speaker Abdulhadi Al-Majali has resorted to releasing the names of absent deputies to the press in the hopes that they would be

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shamed into doing their jobs. End Note. Active and motivated MPs tell us about their embarrassment regarding the body's lack of a work ethic. MP Mahmoud Kharabsheh recently said, "I hope that someday we will be considered a real parliament."

A Government of MPs?

¶7. (C) A contributing factor to parliament's perceived ineffectiveness is the fact that it has been over a decade since a government contained any MPs. In the face of a generally conservative and anti-reform parliament, King Abdullah's economic and social reforms have been driven by hand-picked officials who can get results. This separation of elected policymakers and appointed implementers has the ongoing effect of reducing parliament's influence on the course of Jordanian politics. As a result, MPs are cut off from the responsibility of guiding national policy and reduced to vague, ill-informed griping from the sidelines.

¶8. (C) Contacts in parliament have recently been abuzz with a rumor that in the near future the King plans to return to governments drawn at least in part from members of parliament. Many of the younger, business-oriented members are eager to take on that responsibility. Rumor has it that after a "test government" featuring ten MPs, the King will then usher in a cabinet drawn entirely from parliament. Many MPs tout their professional qualifications; a few are former ministers with knowledge on particular subjects. MP Hazem Al-Nasser, a former Minister of Water, boasts that "many current members of parliament are more qualified than current members of the government."

¶9. (C) Comment: The King had the idea of selecting some MPs for cabinet office when forming the Dahabi government in November 2007. He believes that this step could demonstrate to qualified, ambitious Jordanians that parliament can be a road to real power, and therefore make them more likely to

run for legislative office. It could thus make parliament a more responsible partner of government, and be a good step toward the King's goal of a strengthened parliament that can eventually form cabinets from within its ranks. However, he was talked out of it by his security advisors, who are loathe to give parliament a foot in the door toward real power. So, there is no certainty the King will take this step, even if it is true he is considering it again. Nor is there any certainty of a cabinet reshuffle soon, although the Prime Minister is contemplating a number of changes later in the year, including abolishment of the Planning Ministry and creation of an OMB-like body, which could create an opportunity for this step. End Comment.

Downside of a Government Drawn from Parliament

¶10. (C) Even outside of the security apparatus, few Jordanians believe that governments should be drawn from parliament. Our Jordanian contacts tend to blame the electoral system for the poor quality of MPs, not the personalities themselves. The standard argument is that as long as the electoral system favors tribal loyalty and East Bankers, it will continue to produce MPs who gain their seats through who they know rather than what they know. In Jordan's insular and elitist political circles, parliament is also criticized as a rich man's club, with the implication that wealthy businessmen have bought, not earned, their seats.

¶11. (C) Even some MPs think that merely drawing ministers from the legislature may not be a positive step. MP Nasser Al-Qaisi is concerned about the conflicts of interest a Prime Minister drawn from the ranks of parliament might face. He told us, "the Prime Minister has to be from outside." MP Abdullah Gharaibeh and parliament's Director of Research Soufian Al-Hassan believe that bringing MPs into the government without the structure of political parties will create a "minister complex" in parliament, in which every member will compete to praise the government in the hopes of being elevated to a higher position. Other contacts wonder if bringing MPs into the government would simply highlight the lack of organized political blocs within Jordanian society. "Political parties should form the government. That way, there won't be a fundamental contradiction between the will of the government and the will of the parliament - they will be the same body," says political activist Fawzi Samhouri. MP Gharaibeh agrees, saying that an extension of the current system of defending parochial interests in the parliament would only be multiplied if MPs were placed in the government without the support and discipline of a party structure.

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Who Needs an Empowered Parliament, Anyway?

¶12. (C) Several of our older, more conservative East Banker contacts see the empowerment of parliament as at best unnecessary, and at worst destabilizing to Jordan's political and social fabric. In their view, parliament is merely a tool that looks good internationally and gives cover as the real "experts" in Jordan's bureaucracy and political elite masterfully run the country. Hassan uses the metaphor of salt in one's meal to describe opposition forces in parliament: "You should have a little bit of salt in your meal, but in the end it's possible to go without it. Too much salt is a problem." Those who favor conspiracy theories have a different opinion on why parliament remains stunted and ineffective. "If the MPs really represented Jordan, a government drawn from parliament would be a good idea," posits MP Nidal Al-Hadid. "But since for the most part MPs represent the security services, it's not so good. The problem is the interference of 'other departments' (that is, the General Intelligence Department) in the process."

Distractions

¶13. (C) It is often observed that members of parliament are cut off from the policy process because they concentrate almost exclusively on constituent services. These demands are recognized and confirmed by MPs themselves, who constantly field calls and visiting supplicants who want help getting jobs and government services, or navigating the bureaucracy. Hadid, a tribal MP, says that, "the work of parliament is easy. The work outside of parliament is hard. People ask you for help, for jobs, for support, for money. This is the hard part. They don't want laws. They want services." The only way that they can point to accomplishments and thereby get re-elected is to intervene on behalf of individual constituents. MP Tareq Khoury says that the provision of services is all-consuming; with no party machines or staff members to field requests, MPs spend most of their time doing the individualized service work that voters expect.

¶14. (C) There is another, subtler tie between MPs' focus on constituent services and neglect of political issues. A few MPs have told us that there is a correlation between the ability of MPs to serve constituents and their willingness to support the government. MP Hadid complains that "if you want to be independent in parliament, you can't say anything against the government," and insists that there is a de facto blacklist of "uncooperative" MPs. These MPs are then unable to deliver services, a political death sentence in a system that prizes connections over all else. MP Qaisi calls it "lateral interference": "If you don't fall in line, there will be no financial support for your district, and you will have no ability to appoint people in the civil service."

Comment

¶15. (C) An overarching commitment to stability (as they see it) in Jordan, both from its political establishment and its people, is hindering the development of a stronger parliament. The lack of resources and capacity within parliament is primarily behind that unwillingness to take a risk on an MP-led government. USG resources are committed to advancing the role of parliament and those who serve in it - a three year \$8.6 million grant for strengthening the capacity of parliament is currently being administered by the State University of New York, and a two-year, \$5 million follow-on plan is being finalized. Contacts in parliament laud the project, especially its installation of an electronic voting system. As the project continues, systemic reforms to match physical and procedural capacity will be needed.

¶16. (C) Strengthening Jordan's parliament will require strong leadership - parliamentary leaders who can rally nationwide support, and leaders in government who are willing to cede power in pursuit of stronger, more responsive institutions. Some MPs (particularly a bloc of pro-business reformers led by Al-Nasser and Al-Qaisi) seem determined to push somewhat the boundaries on oversight, but their aspirations are limited. A bold move such as constituting a government with MPs would be a significant step forward, but is neither likely nor, in isolation, something that would make the institution of parliament more effective and relevant.

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